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AUTHOR Thomas, Vincent J.
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ABSTRACT

In 1974 the Virginia General Assembly adopted a senate resolution directing the state board of education to study laws preventing youths from choosing alternatives to compulsory school attendance. The board appointed a committee that studied the matter and made recommendations concerning the development of graduation requirements reflecting competencies; the development of alternative schools and programs at the local level; the reduction of the compulsory attendance age to 16 throughout the state and, for a three-year test period, to 15 for certain districts; the enactment of legislation to provide 12 years of free public education, nine of which would be compulsory and three of which would be available at any stage of life; the elimination of duplicate efforts between the schools and the community colleges; the provision of inservice education on employment opportunities to guidance personnel; the establishment of a network of youth services; and the undertaking of a study to determine the magnitude and probable cause of truancy and dropouts. All the recommendations were accepted and implementation is underway except on the one for reducing the compulsory age. Alternatives are being sought. (Author/IRT)

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Remarks by

VINCENT J. THOMAS

President, Virginia Board of Education
Richmond, Virginia

"SHOULD WE LOWER THE COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE AGE?"
(Clinic No. E-75)

Annual Convention Clinic Session
National School Boards Association
San Francisco, California
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Should we lower the compulsory attendance age?

This is one of those deceptively simple questions, the debate over which divides school boards and tears state legislatures apart. Since the compulsory attendance requirements differ widely from state to state, and since each state has its own unique set of laws, regulations, customs, educational goals and objectives and other circumstances which bear in on this complicated, emotional and controversial problem, it is virtually impossible to suggest any one single solution which would be applicable to every state.

Therefore, it is not my intention today to try to answer that tough question for you in any definitive manner, but rather to tell you of an experience we have had in Virginia, what we have done as a result of it, and what is likely to transpire in the future. Let me say at the outset, however, that we have neither laid this problem to rest nor have we resolved all differences, but rather have concluded that the problems surrounding compulsory attendance must be subjected to continuing study and attention by all elements of our Virginia society, including educators, legislators, parents, businessmen and state and local officials.

In February, 1974, the Virginia General Assembly adopted Senate Joint Resolution No. 60 directing the Board of Education to do the following:

> "Conduct a study of all laws pertaining to compulsory attendance, child labor, workmen compensation, and any other laws, having effect toward barring adolescent youths from the legitimate choice of constructive alternatives to school attendance, without special permissions or actions, and that said Board make positive recommendations for modifying such existing laws to meet current needs".

In response to this directive, the Board of Education established a committee of diverse interests to examine the related issues suggested by the General Assembly, and my remarks are based on the research efforts, findings, discussions of that committee and its recommendations to the Board of Education. I served as an ex-officio member of that committee.

The purposes and interests of major societal institutions merge and blend together around the subject of compulsory school attendance, and the Committee concluded that truancy and juvenile crime were symptoms of a general breakdown in the traditional processes of youth socialization. Therefore, the report of the Committee also addressed the larger question of the socialization of youth in Virginia as part of the study.

Six separate studies were undertaken to gather data, and the final recommendations were based, in large measure, on the findings of these studies.

First, an effort was made to determine the extent of truancy in Virginia by asking each high school principal to indicate the number of truants, by grade level, in his/her school during the 1973-74 term. A "Truant" was defined as any student who missed 20 percent or more of his membership days during the 1973-74 term. The principals also were asked to estimate the staff time spent per week on truancy related problems.

Second, the principals were asked to provide information on the instructional and administrative arrangements in their respective schools. Data were gathered on the number and type of required course offerings, elective offerings, alternative programs available, and staff. These data were correlated with truancy rates.

Third, twelve schools were asked to provide certain information about ten truants and ten nontruants in order to establish a "profile" of truant characteristics.

Fourth, the staffs of the same twelve schools were surveyed to determine their perceptions on selected issues considered relevant to compulsory attendance.

Fifth, a sample of Virginia employers was surveyed to determine perceptions on selected issues considered relevant to compulsory attendance.

Finally, the Virginia Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court judges were surveyed to determine how they perceived the purposes and effectiveness of compulsory school attendance.

Following the spirited and lengthy analysis and discussion of these studies, the Committee submitted the following recommendations to the Board of Education:

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education direct its staff (with the assistance of local school personnel, citizen groups, and private employers) to develop graduation requirements reflecting achievement of competencies deemed essential to the survival of the individual and the society.

Recommendation 2

The Committee urges the Board of Education to encourage local school divisions to develop alternative schools and/or program alternatives within schools to provide instructional curricular choices for parents and students.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education urge the General Assembly to reduce the compulsory school attendance age requirement in the Commonwealth from 17 years to 16 years effective September, 1976. Also, it is urged that the compulsory attendance law be aggressively and faithfully enforced.

Furthermore, the Committee suggests that the Board of Education request the General Assembly to reduce the compulsory attendance age requirement from 17 years to 15 years in the following school divisions, for a three year trial period, beginning September, 1976: Richmond City, Henrico, Chesterfield, Norfolk, Charlottesville, Roanoke City, Roanoke County, Williamsburg, Suffolk, Culpeper, Buckingham, Fluvanna, and Danville.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education urge the General Assembly to enact legislation to provide each citizen of the Commonwealth with 12 years of free public education beyond kindergarten, within the public school system, 9 years of which would be compulsory and the remaining 3 years for use at any stage of life.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education and the State Board for Community Colleges continue their efforts to eliminate the unnecessary duplication of effort, facilities, and equipment in many program areas.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education immediately move to provide general in-service education for all guidance personnel regarding projected employment opportunities in Virginia.

Recommendation 7

The Committee urges the Board of Education to work with the Division of Youth Services (or other appropriate agencies) to establish a network of community-based youth service workers in areas with high rates of truancy and/or juvenile crime. Further, the Committee urges the Board of Education to work for improved communication, cooperation, and coordination with all other agencies involved with youth services in Virginia.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Board of Education, through its Department of Research, undertake a longitudinal study of truants and dropouts in Virginia in an effort to determine the exact magnitude and probable causes of these phenomena.

When the above recommendations were made public, the public attention focused on recommendation No. 3 lowering the attendance age, and the Board received comment from individuals, the press and from organizations, most of them opposing the lowering of the attendance age. The Board, after considerable debate and public input, adopted the recommendations of the Committee, with the exception of the one dealing with compulsory attendance, and substituted instead its recommendation to the General Assembly that selected school divisions, on a voluntary basis, be allowed to lower the attendance age to 15 for the biennium only, provided they had in place an approved program of alternative education for students so affected. This recommendation was not accepted by the General Assembly, and the Board is now considering alternative courses of action.

The other recommendations, however, were generally accepted by all concerned, and implementation of them is underway.

In Virginia, there does not seem to be any great or urgent desire to lower the compulsory attendance age from its current 17 years. Instead, it is our continuing policy to allow local school boards the maximum amount of flexibility in devising non-traditional programs to meet the needs of all of their students. Procedures are in place to excuse youngsters below 17 years from school attendance for good and sufficient reason, after appropriate consultation between family, court and school. As alternative education programs are devised and implemented , we are finding ways to provide state aid for these programs not in the traditional mold.

Perhaps we would better off in changing our terminology from "compulsory attendance" to compulsory educational involvement", or some other suitable phrase to free us from the custodial connotation of "compulsory attendance".